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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the findings from several interviews conducted with grandparents to ascertain the process of grief they experienced with the death of their grandchild. Typically, a grandparent's grief focuses on the dual loss aspect. In addition to the loss of a younger family member, grandparents must console their own child, the bereaved parent. The role they take with their own child is confusing and assumptions cannot be made as to what they should expect from each other. Other issues may arise because of the differences in the culture, personal beliefs, and religion of their child and spouse. Grandparents found that jumping in to solve problems may not be the best response. They may also experience some physical aspects of grief such as chest pain and shortness of breath. Confusion may set into as to whether these are symptoms represent more serious conditions. Responding to the stress with alcohol or drugs may only add to their confusion and grief. Grandparents need support and care in their time of grief. Research in this area would help counselors understand and respond to the dynamics of grandparents' grief. A lists of Web sites and an address of a support group is included. (Author/JDM)

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When a Grandchild Dies: What to Do, What to Say, How to Cope

Presentation to ADEC Annual Conference
March 30, 2001
By
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When a child dies, grandparents' grief is often overlooked or minimized. Existing resources, including books and support groups, focus primarily on the bereaved parents. Grandparents may have a page or two devoted to their grief, but little else. Yet because of their place in the family system, grandparents' grief has many unique aspects that deserve greater exploration and attention.

When I set out to write ***When a Grandchild Dies: What to Do, What to Say, How to Cope***, I was unprepared for the complexity of the topic. Recognizing that my "experience" as a bereaved mother was inadequate for the job, I researched the subject by interviewing several grandparents. Those who contributed to the book ranged from 40-80+ and came from all walks of life. Some experienced the loss of an infant grandchild, while others watched their grandchildren become young adults before their lives were cut short. Some were married, but others were divorced or widowed. Most were women; the men were either not present due to death or divorce, or preferred not to interview. Despite the diversity of the individuals and their stories, recurring patterns and themes began to emerge.

What little is written about grandparents' grief typically focuses on the dual loss aspect. In addition to the death, which is a loss "out of the order of things," grandparents are also helpless to console their children, the bereaved parents. Despite all their years of parenting experience, there is nothing a grandparent can do in this situation to make things better. In fact,

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with the desire to protect and console may come words or deeds that are inappropriate or ill-received.

This can begin early in the process, at the funeral or even before. For example, grandparents may take over handling the funeral details, with the reasoning that it will reduce the family's suffering; yet some parents feel the need to do this in tribute to the child who died. Equally upsetting may be a bereaved mother returning home from the hospital after a stillbirth, only to find the nursery dismantled.

What's confusing for the grandparents is that in some situations, the bereaved parents need and expect this level of assistance. Grandparents may do well to focus on opening a dialogue and finding out what the bereaved children need and offer that, rather than making assumptions.

Beyond the dual grief, though, grandparents have many other issues. For example, in-law relationships can be strained at this time, especially if the relationships weren't good to begin with. Differences in culture, religion, and personal beliefs may become more problematic, causing long-term rifts and hurt feelings. One grandmother found herself to be the target of her daughter-in-law's grief anger simply because the grandmother was still living! In addition, the daughter-in-law, who had not been religious prior to the death, insisted on a full-blown Catholic funeral, which the Jewish grandmother found upsetting.

These rifts may grow further if the bereaved parents demonstrate differing grieving styles and marital difficulties. The temptation for grandparents, once again, may be to jump in to try to help, rather than encouraging the bereaved parents to work things out with each other or see a professional for assistance.

Grandparents may also be called upon to play a major role in helping their living grandchildren through the grief process. They may, in fact, find themselves more involved with the day-to-day parenting responsibilities for a time, bringing additional challenges they may not have expected. Their substantial parenting experience may be a tremendous asset to the family if the grandparents, like those I interviewed, are able to allow the grandchildren to express their grief in age-appropriate ways. One grandchild, for example, spoke casually about speaking to her dead sister and other deceased relatives, and her grandparents simply let her express herself freely.

The physical symptoms that accompany grief may be a challenge for grandparents, especially those of a more advanced age. Chest pains and shortness of breath – is this grief or an impending heart attack?

There are two potential difficulties with this aspect of grief. The first is that grandparents may find themselves overly concerned or fearful about their health. The second, and more dangerous, is that grandparents or even their physicians will dismiss symptoms as grief-related when a serious physical problem may actually exist.

Grandparents may not realize that they are at risk for substance abuse problems. We think if we're a certain age and are not addicted, that this can't happen. Some of the grandparents I spoke with were prescribed drugs to calm them after the deaths of their grandchildren, some of which are potentially addictive. Grandparents would do well to become alert to the signs of drug or alcohol addiction and to understand that this possibility exists at any age.

With grief comes the loss of dreams. For grandparents, one of the most significant and poignant losses is that of their legacy. If this is the only grandchild, this loss may be particularly intense.

Grandparent grief is very lonely. Most of the grandparents I spoke with did not talk to their families about their grief. One time I went to a memorial service, and I was called to the ladies restroom, where a grandmother was all alone, sobbing. She said, "I wanted to be so strong for my daughter on this day." She felt ashamed for losing control, and uncomfortable about sharing her pain with anyone.

People may have the mistaken belief that once someone is old enough to be a grandparent, that life experience would teach him or her how to deal with adversity. However, my observation is, that no matter how much life experience someone has, the death of a grandchild is an event no one can be prepared for. One of the grandmothers I interviewed was a breast cancer survivor; some had lost spouses. There was no shortage of life experience, and yet no one in this situation felt that to be a benefit.

What can grandparents do? First, it's important for them to get in touch with their own feelings about the losses they are facing. Because they are often busy taking care of other family members, grandparents may set their own feelings aside, creating more difficulties later. Also, when their feelings don't pass in a short period of time, grandparents may feel ashamed and embarrassed at their continued grief.

One grandmother told the story of the intense anger that had come as a complete surprise. She was attempting, without success, to balance her checkbook. After several failed attempts, she was overcome with rage and threw the papers across the room. She then went to her garage,

where she proceeded to beat her freezer with a board. She and her husband were both frightened by her display, although they were able to laugh and cry about it later.

This grandmother was fortunate that her husband was supportive. Not all grandparents had this experience. One grandmother, married for nearly 50 years to her best friend, discovered that whenever she wanted to talk about the deceased grandchild, her husband would close down emotionally. Because she had never had this experience before, she was shocked at the lack of support. Even after 50 years, grandparents may, therefore, discover unique grief styles and the need to adapt and adjust to their spouses' responses.

Grandparents are often confused about what to say to their bereaved children. Most agreed that talking about the grandchild helped. The bereaved parents tended to feel less alone and more willing to share their grief when the grandparents initiated conversations about it. Beyond that, they recommended that grandparents do more listening than talking. Statements such as "You can have another child," or "You need to get on with your life," can create strained relationships.

In terms of their own support, though, grandparents can benefit from finding someone outside of the family to confide in. This could be a religious professional, a therapist, or if available, a caring friend. While grandparents should be able to express themselves within their families, most felt uncomfortable doing so. Grandparents are also, at times, on the receiving end of thoughtless comments from family and friends, such as, "It didn't happen to you, you know," or "You need to be strong. Your children really need you right now."

This is where the lack of resources for grandparents is particularly distressing. Until ***When a Grandchild Dies*** was released, the only full-length book published was ***Grandma's Tears*** by June Cerza Koff, which is now out of print. Recently, Mary Lou Reed published

Grandparents Cry Twice. Other than that, there are some booklets and pamphlets available through various bereavement organizations, but that's it. Most major support groups such as The Compassionate Friends welcome grandparents, but of the grandparents I spoke with, all felt uncomfortable about attending. Those who had gone to groups felt out of place as the only grandparent in attendance; others felt inhibited about expressing themselves if their bereaved children were present.

In summary, the grief of grandparents has several unique qualities. They must learn to cope with a difficult, dual grief. They may experience challenges with their sons- or daughters-in-law, or find those that already existed magnified. They may be called upon to care for their living grandchildren, even handling day-to-day parenting responsibilities. They may attribute physical symptoms to a serious condition, or have a serious condition minimized because of their loss. They may be blindsided by problems with alcohol or other drugs. They may discover previously unknown marital challenges, and feel alone and unsupported by family and friends.

Finally, grieving grandparents will learn that few resources exist to help them through one of life's most horrific losses. My research was only a sampling, and not a formal, informed study. Grandparents need and deserve additional attention to these issues: more research, more books, and more support groups to assist them.

Recommended Resources

Books

- ***When a Grandchild Dies: What to Do, What to Say, How to Cope***, by Nadine Galinsky. Gal In Sky Publishing, Houston, Texas - 1999.
- ***Grandparents Cry Twice***, by Mary Lou Reed. Baywood Publishing Company, Inc., Amityville, New York - 2000.

Booklets

- ***For Bereaved Grandparents***, by Margaret Gerner. Centering Corporation, Omaha, Nebraska – 1990.
- ***A Grandparent's Sorrow***, by Pat Schwiebert, RN. Perinatal Loss, Portland, Oregon – 1996.
- ***Grieving Grandparents After Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Infant Death***, by Lori Leininger and Sherokee Ilse. Pregnancy and Infant Loss Center, Wayzata, Minnesota – 1985.

Other Resources

- **Web Site:** http://home.att.net/~laurley
- **Support Group:** A.G.A.S.T. (Alliance of Grandparents Against SIDS Tragedy) (888-774-7437)